

The Imperturbable Duchess

BY J. D. BERESFORD

WHILE it is difficult to defend Cunningham Black, his conduct needs no explanation. That diablerie which spices all his writing is characteristic of the man himself; there is more than a hint of the satyr about him. The two waves of hair on each side of his forehead inevitably suggest horns, and the set of his eyes, the half-whimsical cynicism of his expression, are all in keeping with the popular conception of the hooved devil. Lastly, his extraordinary thinness, which is emphasized by his prim, neat dress; his narrow, bony hands and feet, the curious squareness of his little shoulders, all heighten the impish effect of him.

As to the origin of the long campaign—that, too, is easily explained. Cunningham Black was the son of a bookseller, and although he had made himself acceptable to society by his cleverness and his wonderful adaptability, he was always a little over-assertive. He had not forgotten the bookseller's shop, and he continually persuaded himself into a contempt for those who moved so easily in ways which he had studied with long effort. Doubtless he tried very earnestly to despise these people with whom he loved to be seen.

Every one now knows the other protagonist. The unhappy Valetta, Duchess of Tottenham, has attained a celebrity she neither desired nor deserved. Her very tricks of manner and speech are familiar to the general public. Unhappy she certainly is, and for no fault of her own. There were no less than three Duchesses of Tottenham when the trouble began, and she was the younger of the two dowagers. She was, in fact, quite terribly poor for her position, and she cannot be blamed for staying with the Davidsons, or with any other people in whose houses she could really economize. Meanness in the matter of tipping the servants was excusable in a duchess.

Black was not in an unusually bad temper when the incident happened. He had lunched on the corridor-train, not to his complete satisfaction, but still sufficiently, and when he had found a first-class smoking-carriage on the branch line and settled himself down to a very decent cigar, he was probably in a fairly comfortable humor. Then, just as the train was starting, Valetta was ushered with some ceremony into his empty compartment.

Black did not know that it was the Duchess; he did not know that the Duchess was going to the Davidsons. He only knew that a thin, middle-aged, rather expensively dressed woman in a *pince-nez* had been thrust upon him, and he resented it. He realized, too, the fact that she was treated with much deference by the attendant guard. There was an innate radicalism in Black which was always up in arms against this show of deference to the upper classes.

He had put up his long, thin feet on the cushion of the opposite seat, and he withdrew them very deliberately when he found that the intruding woman intended to enter that compartment and no other.

The train started immediately; the Duchess, already affronted, took her seat in the corner by the farther door, and Black put his feet up again and continued his cigar.

The Duchess coughed and let down the window. She had her back to the engine; Black was facing it, and he was immediately conscious of a draught. He scowled at his companion and turned up the collar of his overcoat.

The Duchess coughed again—a cough which perfectly expressed her dislike of the cigar and the smoker of it.

Black was exasperated. "Why travel in a smoking-carriage, madam, if you object to the smell of smoke?" he asked, acidly. "The train is not full."

"I did not notice," said Valetta, and

put her head a little back to stare at this impossible fellow-traveler of hers. It was a trick of hers; she had put her head back in precisely the same way when she was a spectacled school-girl of fourteen, long before she had any hope of becoming a duchess.

Black put her pose down to aristocratic intolerance. He shrugged his shoulders, looked at the ground-glass legend on the window and then at his cigar.

"You can change at the next station," he said.

"Insufferable!" said Valetta, addressing the window on her own side of the carriage. She was quite cool, and she spoke with perfect distinctness.

That word roused all that was worst in Black, but it immediately cooled his temper. This was a declaration of war, and he was far too clever to fight when he was angry.

He opened the window beside him and threw away his less than half-smoked cigar, put down his feet, tossed his hat onto the rack, and so prepared the ground to give battle on even terms.

"Under these new conditions," he said, "may I be allowed to close that window?"

Valetta gave a slight inclination of her head, and continued to take an absorbing interest in the landscape.

Black got up and closed the window, quite politely.

When he had returned to his seat, he said calmly, with something of a judicial air, "I shall change compartments at the next station, but I should like to point out that it is you who owe an apology, not myself."

Valetta turned and looked at him with the same lift of the head, smiled faintly, and turned away again.

Black was badly nettled, but he controlled his voice. "I don't press the point of the apology," he said. "Put it, if you like, that I am elaborating my own defense. I am aggrieved. You seriously interfere with my comfort, presume beyond all limits on the privileges of your sex, and then calmly assume that I am in the wrong throughout. I resent your attitude, your calm assumption of superiority. I analyze the situation from a purely detached point of view, and I can find no excuse for your attitude."

Valetta had a grave failing. She lacked any sense of humor. That sense would have saved the situation, but she failed completely to appreciate that this scene was pure comedy. Her only refuge was dignity. No one could deny that she had dignity.

She turned to Black, lifted her *pince-nez*, and held it, somewhat after the manner of a lorgnette, a little in front of her eyes—she had always suffered from bad sight. She studied him for a moment, and then, as the train was already slackening speed, she said, "If you will kindly open the door for me, I will change carriages."

"I have said that I will save you the necessity," returned Black.

The train stopped, and Valetta, who was on the platform side, held up a hand to some official visible on the station. The official—it chanced to be the station-master—leaped to open the door for her. She made a regal exit, leaving her newfound vassal to collect such small belongings as she had brought with her and transfer them to another carriage.

Black was left to light another cigar and ponder the things he ought to have said. He was conscious of a distinct feeling of regret that he would in all probability never have an opportunity of saying any of those things to the person whom they concerned. That regret was soon wiped away.

When he arrived at the station for the Davidsons' place, he had some difficulty in finding a porter. There was only one, and he and the station-master were both engaged on behalf of Black's late traveling companion; they were giving their whole attention to the instructions of the Duchess's maid. Valetta sailed straight out of the station and entered the Davidson motor. When Black at last received attention, he found that he would share the Davidson omnibus with the Duchess's maid and the Duchess's luggage.

He had quite grasped the situation, and he had plenty of time during his eight-mile drive behind the third best pair of carriage-horses to consider his plan of campaign. Whatever Black's failings, he had courage and confidence.

They met within ten minutes of Black's arrival.

Valetta had spent the interval in the rooms set apart for her, and had done her best without maid or heavy luggage to make herself presentable. Her best was little enough, and she had not taken off her hat when she came into the drawing-room for tea.

Black had just sat down; he was in the Duchess's direct path toward her hostess, and he got up gracefully and moved to one side. He was always at home among furniture, never in the least embarrassed, gauche, or clumsy.

Introductions were not the rule at the Davidsons, but the Duchess was outside all ordinary rules. Other visitors were not introduced to her; they were presented.

Little Mrs. Davidson cast a quick glance round the members of her house-party in search of strangers, and noted Claude Greening, the brilliant young member for Brittleworth, and Cunningham Black. She gave Greening the preference.

"Oh, Duchess," said Mrs. Davidson, "may I? I don't think Mr. Greening is known to you—for Brittleworth, you remember; and Mr. Cunningham Black—the writer, you know."

Greening bowed, a shade too formally. Black smiled, and gave a faint inclination of the head. "Curiously enough," he said, "the Duchess and I traveled part of the way down together, and though quite unknown to each other, of course, we had quite an interesting discussion on the feminist question."

Mrs. Davidson beamed—dear Mr. Black was such a help; he was always so amusing and interesting. She caught her breath with a gasp—a curious little way she had before speaking, as if she had just finished a deflating laugh—but before she could begin, the Duchess took up the conversation.

Valetta's eye had rested for one moment upon Black, and then had wandered away from him as if he were some negligible little animal that had brought upon itself a moment's undeserved attention.

"So interested in your speeches, Mr. Greening," she said, "so—so—er—interesting I found them." She was not in the least discomposed, but she was characteristically unable to put a sentence

together or to give utterance to any remark that was not platitudinous or in some way banal. She had never even posed as a clever woman.

Greening bowed again, muttered something about being highly complimented, then pulled himself together, cleared his throat, and said, "Reporters make rather a hash of one, though," and proceeded to tell a story of a reporter's, or printer's, error in the rendering of one of his own efforts.

It was rather a dull story, but the Duchess gave it most flattering attention. At its conclusion she caught at the word "misrepresent," which Greening had used, and said, "You must find it very annoying when you are—they misrepresent you like that; it must be so annoying."

"Extremely," replied Greening, and cleared his throat again, but Mrs. Davidson and Black both rushed in to head off any further stories of the same type. Mrs. Davidson's gasp gave Black the lead.

"One may be misrepresented without being reported," he remarked. He raised his voice slightly and gathered in the attention of other groups which, temporarily alienated by Greening, had fallen into private discussions. "Personally," he went on, "I find it rather amusing; I suppose it is only the very earnest, sincere people like politicians and other professions beginning with a 'p' like popular preachers and philanthropists and public prosecutors, who simply can't bear to be misconstrued. I've been fortunate in being consistently misunderstood; if any one had ever taken me seriously, I should have been living in an attic now, like all the other writers with a purpose."

Valetta tried to change the topic, but she could not think of any remark to make. She never took the initiative in conversation; she had a way of permitting other people to speak to her, and she was out of practice. She did begin by saying, "Er—ahem!" but as no more interesting continuation suggested itself—she was bewilderedly trying to think of something that began with a "p"—she repeated her opening in a different tone, giving it a bronchial inflection which suggested some misguided cake-

crumb in the dual and always magnificently dignified throat. Valetta could have choked with dignity.

Black had the game all to himself. He had a whimsical manner which always gave interest to his conversation. If the things he said were not actually funny, his expression and gestures made them appear so.

"As an instance," he said, "of how one may be misunderstood. I was in the train a few days ago, just recovering from a railway lunch. Had to change onto a branch line and got a smoking-carriage all to myself, making myself really comfortable, when a dignified lady in a *pince-nez* got in just as the train was starting. It wasn't a corridor; no escape for either of us. Her magnificence—philanthropist probably, certainly one of the people who begin with a capital 'P'; might have been a peeress—anyway, she objected to smoking. Didn't say anything, you understand, but looked and coughed and opened the window; very dignified all the time." Black's expression conveyed an impression of the lady's dignity so well that even the footman who was handing the tea had to fetch cakes from a side-table. Black had his audience well in hand. He shrugged his shoulders and continued: "What could I do? I threw away my just-lighted cigar, I took my feet off the cushions, I even took off my cap—still the lady looked affronted. Then—a mistake, I admit—I tried to defend myself. I put it quite politely that I was not the aggressive party. I said I would change compartments at the next station, but that I could not bear to be misunderstood. I wanted to make it plain that I had had no idea when I took my seat that this was the particular compartment in which she always traveled. I was humble and, I hope, delicately apologetic. But, no! I received no sign of forgiveness."

"What a weird person!" interpolated one of Black's listeners.

Black held up his hand. "Ah! But I have a theory," he said. "Is it possible that this lady could have been a princess, traveling incognita, some very elect person who was unable to recognize my right to exist in the same compartment?"

A chorus of incredulity greeted this theory, but before Black could get a hearing Valetta very distinctly "er-ahemmed" again. She had thought of a remark.

"How are the pheasants doing this year?" she asked, addressing Mrs. Davidson, and Black got no further chance to claim the general attention. The point of his theory was lost. Every one gave way to the Duchess.

Black had all the qualities that go to the making of success, and chief among them was that which in a statesman or a general might be dignified as "an iron will"; in the present case it may be spoken of as pertinacity. He was thirty-five, and twenty years' incessant attention to various problems had not only made his name familiar to a large reading public, but had also raised him to such an assured position in literature that his books received long reviews on the day of publication. And had not his assiduity and genius received even greater rewards than these? Was he not to be found, a welcome guest, in a house-party that included a duchess? But this very gift for persistence, newly combining with that radical flaw in him which can only be traced to an hereditary taint, was working now to doubtful ends. He had such confidence in his position that he was determined to humiliate Valetta, Duchess of Tottenham. She was a stupid woman; she had nothing but her dignity; she should be taught that the brains of a genius were worth more than an hereditary title, however magnificent. Cunningham Black was piqued, and he had pertinacity.

He began his reasoned campaign at dinner that evening. He sat a long way from Valetta at the table, but that very fact gave him an opportunity.

The dinner began badly. For some reason there was a slight atmosphere of constraint. People seemed bored with one another, and none of them made the least attempt to claim the general attention. In vain did Mrs. Davidson gasp and bubble, speak to Mr. Greening across two intervening guests, and to Professor Barrett across four, in the endeavor to draw some interesting topic from them. Most vainly did she throw a beseeching glance at Cunningham Black; he was

deliberately glum; he recognized that the whole party was flat, and he meant it to remain flat until he exerted his power; he meant to prove his capacity and value later. Mrs. Davidson relapsed into conversation with her dull partner, Lord Graves; she was expert hostess enough to know when her visitors wanted to be let alone.

Then, somewhere about the sixth course, Black exerted himself. In his own dry, excellently restrained way, he began to exercise his wit. He aroused a ripple of laughter; one by one he collected hearers from remote corners of the table; he evoked discussion; and when the dessert was set and the servants had left the room, he began a story to which every one listened except the Duchess and Davidson; and Davidson would have listened if he had been permitted.

But as Black told his story he was giving all his attention to the far end of the table, however much he appeared to be addressing the company at large. He was keeping his story going and awaiting his opportunity. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Valetta deeply pondering some remark to recall the attention of the erring Davidson, who had been unsuccessfully endeavoring to keep up a conversation with his apparently deeply interested partner while he tried to catch the point of the story that was creating so much amusement.

Black was nearing the climax when he suddenly held up his hand and leaned forward. The laughter subsided, an expectant silence fell over the whole table, and precisely at that moment of breathless suspense the voice of Valetta was heard to say very clearly, "Er—ahem! How are the pheasants doing this year?"

Some silly ingénue tittered, and even the most diplomatic were unable to refrain from a glance toward the head of the table.

By all Black's calculation the Duchess should have looked extremely foolish, but Valetta put her head back slightly, looked down the table with a gentle smile of tolerant approval, and turned to receive her host's answer.

It was certainly not Valetta who was covered with confusion, but many others of the Davidsons' guests had a curious

feeling that they had been betrayed into a breach of good manners, and later they sought opportunities of amusing the Duchess, and it was noticeable that Black was not quite a success. It almost seemed that the avoidance of Black was a recommendation to favor in the eyes of the Duchess. Greening, for instance, was plainly in the ducal good books, although he was most distinctly a bore. Uncharitable people said that Valetta's slight deafness accounted for her favor of Greening—she did not hear half he said.

It was not Black's fault, so much was tacitly agreed. He was not responsible for that contrepémps of the dinner-table. He happened to be unlucky, that was all, but unlucky people were not in vogue with those who sought the honor of aristocratic recognition.

Black himself was peculiarly sensitive to atmospheres, and he saw very clearly that he must play his game with great caution. In that house it would be fatal to whisper any insinuation against the Duchess—her slight deafness, her stupidity, her silly little mannerisms were all covered with the glamour that surrounds the ducal coronet. At the back of his mind he was quite conscious that, despite those twenty assiduous years, he had not overcome the reproach of the bookseller's shop. Valetta might be rude, might commit almost any solecism, and at the worst her rudeness might be attributed to eccentricity. Let Cunningham Black make one mistake in breeding, and it would be brought against him as a damning accusation; it would be a *faux pas*; it would be evidence of his upbringing.

So he walked very warily at the Davidsons', and, afraid to make new opportunity, waited for one to be presented. But when such opportunity came it was too slight to afford him any real satisfaction, and never did Valetta lose for one instant her personal dignity.

Defeated but not disheartened, Black undertook to solve the problem as he had solved so many others. Its very difficulty attracted him. But in this house his handicap was too great. He left the Davidsons' three days earlier than he had originally intended, and returned to London to begin his great campaign.

The opening shot fired three months later was a mere rocket to attract attention. A story of Black's appeared in a well-known magazine, and told as a piece of pure comedy the incident of the railway carriage. He made a good story out of it, distorted the facts, and introduced some kind of a plot. It attracted more attention than short stories generally do, because it was in Black's best manner, and was particularly well-finished and witty. Its chief charm, however, was the remarkable character sketch of the woman who intruded into the smoking-compartment. She was not a duchess in the story, but the wife of a retired merchant; but everybody who was personally acquainted with the younger dowager Duchess of Tottenham smiled as they read, and said, "How very like Valetta!" and either told their friends to read the story or sent the magazine to them by post. There was, indeed, some quality about that character sketch which impressed itself on the public mind.

The story was followed within a month by the production of Black's comedy, "Madam Dignity."

The play had been written and accepted under another title before Black paid his epoch-making visit to the Davidsons, but when he returned to town he had completely rewritten it, despite the urgent remonstrances of the actor-manager, who had pledged himself to its production in the following spring. Originally there had been a countess in the play, the kind of part of which Miss Compton might have made a success, but this part was now altered and expanded until it was second only to that of the actor-manager's. Black stage-managed the play himself, and in addition to his work at the theater he devoted many patient hours to Miss Moira Greville, who, it will be remembered, made such a sensation in the part of Lady Freake.

"Madam Dignity" was unquestionably a brilliant comedy, but it is doubtful if it would have run for eighteen months had it not been for the interest which was awakened in this part of Lady Freake. On the first night there were, perhaps, a dozen people in the theater who recognized that this was not a caricature so much as a portrait of one of the three Duchesses of Tottenham.

Lord Graves grew very warm on the subject. He said that it was scandalous that a playwright should be allowed to draw the character of such a well-known figure, or an actress be permitted to mimic a duchess. He said that Black and Miss Greville and the manager could be had up for libel. He was so disturbed about it all—remembering, perhaps, that he, too, had been one of the Davidsons' house-party, and might also be portrayed on the stage—that he talked about it to every one he knew, and the advance booking broke all records.

Valetta herself went to see the play, and smiled sweetly through the performance. Her only comment on it was that it was "quite amusing."

It may have been due to the actor-manager's press-agent, or it may have been an accident, that the secret became known to the general public. If the disclosure was the work of the press-agent, he can hardly be blamed. Pit, gallery, and upper boxes have to be filled, as well as dress-circle and stalls. The agent's knowledge of human nature was profound. Once the secret was known, the cheaper parts of the house were crammed every night and at each of the three matinées which soon became necessary. The woman in the street was no longer to be put off by the imaginary portraits of the aristocracy which had hitherto satisfied her. In "Madam Dignity" she saw, if not an actual duchess, so good a representation of one that she could recognize the original in the Park or at the Palace Gates on the occasion of a drawing-room.

That possibility drew crowds to Hyde Park on Sunday mornings, and when, at the beginning of the season, Valetta drove round in her shabby hired landau, a wave of emotion passed over the ring of sight-seers. Anybody who was anybody could not fail to point an excited finger and whisper: "That's her. That's the Duchess of Tottenham."

Valetta had to cease driving in the Park,

So far Black had merely drawn a strikingly true portrait of Valetta; he had not laughed at her and pointed the finger of scorn. His plan was deep and far-seeing; he desired the public to become familiar with the person he in-

tended to ridicule. When that object had been achieved, he started the Mrs. Scroggins vogue.

Mrs. Scroggins was a charwoman of doubtful antecedents and uncertain honesty, who first appeared as a subsidiary character in Black's novel, *Little Frailties*. She spoke lodging-house English, she was stupid and a little deaf, but she overcame the doubts and questions of all her employers by her extraordinary dignity. All Black's best work was in the portrait of Mrs. Scroggins, and such was his genius in depicting her that the character carried conviction; the enormous public which read *Little Frailties* realized for the first time how far personal dignity will cover a multitude of minor defects. And no one who had seen "Madam Dignity" could doubt for a moment that Mrs. Scroggins was, in another sphere of life, none other than Valetta, Duchess of Tottenham. Everybody, of course, had seen "Madam Dignity" by that autumn (there were five companies out; the three matinées were still necessary at the West End Theater), and the editors and reviewers, who all gave Black a column on the day of publication, made one or two covert remarks which would have given the show away, even if that portrait had not been obvious.

It was evident that Mrs. Scroggins was too good to wither as a subsidiary character in a novel. Two months after the publication of the novel she appeared as the heroine of a series of short stories (each complete in itself, according to the advertisement) in a new and enterprising magazine. The business manager of that magazine made the most of his opportunity. The boardings of London and the provinces blared Mrs. Scroggins at every passer-by; she was better known than Sherlock Holmes or Captain Kettle; and the poster artist, either by accident or under Black's tuition, had achieved under the rusty bonnet of Mrs. Scroggins a very passable likeness of Valetta, Duchess of Tottenham.

It is doubtful whether, at this point, an action for libel could have been successful; the connecting-train was too long. Could a jury be asked to cast Black in damages because he had caricatured his own creation of Lady Freake in the per-

son of this charwoman? Was it not, on the other hand, too late to bring an action on the grounds of the play which had now been running a year? Even Lord Graves was doubtful. In any case, no action was ever begun.

Black still moved in high society, and when he was questioned he always denied with great warmth and sincerity that he had founded his two celebrated characters on any living personality. When *Mrs. Scroggins* was published in book form after she had made the fortunes of the magazine, Black wrote to all the papers which made insinuations and asseverated with heat that Mrs. Scroggins was an entirely imaginary person. His attitude in this matter, indeed, appeared so disinterested that that summer—nearly two years after the Davidson affair—he was received into houses which had hitherto appeared almost impregnable. Black was the man of the moment that summer.

He did not, however, meet Valetta, Duchess of Tottenham. He probably would not have met her in any case, but, as a matter of fact, she had taken herself and her dignity to Bordighera. The Scroggins vogue had been a little too much for her.

Cunningham Black, despite his origin and his cleverness, was not a bad fellow at heart. He had in the first instance attacked a principle, if he had done it through a person. In the railway carriage in which he had first met the Duchess he had wanted to defend himself. He had known in his heart that his feet should have come off the cushion and his cigar gone out of the window with great alacrity. He had known that the bookshop had been betrayed by his resentment against the manner of the Duchess's intrusion. If he had been given opportunity, he might have made the *amende honorable*, but Valetta was certainly a little deaf, and possibly she had not heard him very well—it is often difficult to hear well in a train. Then when the mischief had been done he had felt that he must vindicate himself at all costs. If he could have broken through Valetta's reserve of dignity so far as to be allowed to explain himself at the Davidsons', the affair would have gone no further. But confronted with that

awful barrier, he could not let the matter rest; it had become an obsession with him to prove that cleverness was more than the air of the aristocrat.

Now, when he had succeeded in his long campaign, when he was at the height of his fame, and Valetta, over whom he had triumphed, was practically banished, Black was sincerely sorry. He discovered her address in Bordighera, and decided to make full amends.

So he wrote a letter, a long and very tactful letter, in which he humbled himself, while disclaiming any past intention to bring pain to the Duchess. He admitted, nevertheless, that a foolish and altogether wrong-headed public had, in fact, misrepresented him, and he begged that the Duchess would forgive him, and promised that in the event of such forgiveness being graciously bestowed he would call in every copy of the book *Mrs. Seriggins*, and never permit the play to be revived.

He posted his letter and waited anxiously for a reply, but no reply came.

He blamed the Continental postal system. He did not think it possible that the letter could have reached its destination, and though it was the height of the season, and he would miss Ascot, he decided to go to Bordighera and make his amend in person.

He called at the address he had been given, the morning after his arrival, but he was told by the same English maid

he had traveled with in the omnibus that the Duchess of Tottenham was not at home.

He left a card and called again in the afternoon, with no better luck.

But on the second morning he met Valetta in the Gardens. She was in a bath-chair—her health had not been good lately. Black lifted his hat gracefully, and requested the chair-man to stop.

"Forgive me—one moment, Duchess," he began, and continued, with some eloquence, to repeat the matter of his letter. He was quite humble and apologetic to this exiled aristocrat; he made no claim to have achieved any victory; the manner of his apology and the manner of its delivery were unimpeachable.

Valetta sat quite still, a faint smile on her lips, but she did not look at him until he had finished. Then she lifted her head with that gesture which had become so familiar to the great English public, her eyes rested on him for one brief moment, and passed him by.

"Insufferable!" she said, distinctly, addressing the back of the bath-chair-man.

The invalid-chair passed on with dignity and left Cunningham Black in the avenue. He was still bareheaded, and, curiously enough, he was thinking of the bookshop.

He remembered that in the old, old days before he was famous, he had sometimes been cheeky to his father's customers.